The Canadian Institute of Strategic Studies

de L'Institut Canadien D'Etudes Stratégiques

CANADA'S DEFENCE POLICY AFTER SEPTEMBER 11: TO REVIEW OR NOT TO REVIEW?[1]

David Rudd, Executive Director, CISS
Strategic Datalink #103
March 2002

The short-comings of the Canadian Forces (CF), both in terms of manpower and equipment, are well-known to the Canadian public. They have been documented and discussed at length both in the country's major newspapers, on the airwaves, and by witnesses called to testify before the Standing Committee on National Defence and Veterans Affairs (SCONDVA) in Ottawa.

Budgetary woes, coupled with continuing high tempo of operations, and the emergence of new threats to domestic and international peace and security speak to a larger issue: whether the 1994 Defence White Paper provides adequate policy direction at the dawn of the new millennium. The events of September 11, 2001 have added another level of complexity to the debate, as Canadians wonder what role their military can or should play in counter-terrorism.

The objective of this paper is to assess the need for a full review of Canada's defence policy, versus a simpler update of the 1994 Defence White Paper. It will review seminal events of the recent past with in order to gauge the degree to which the security landscape has changed. It will cite domestic economic and political conditions, as well as international trends which, together, present the current government with a reason to take defence policy firmly in hand.

Before the terrorist attacks on the United States, the Canadian Forces were already at a crossroads. Resource constraints had made the achievement of basic policy goals difficult. Only recently has the federal government begun to appreciate the pitfalls of constant deployments. Until 2001 the CF was regarded as manpower pool - a seemingly bottomless pit of human and material resources that did not need to be replenished. Ottawa eventually conceded that this was unsustainable, and announced an 'early-in, early-out' strategy - one which specified that until further notice, future troop deployments would be made for six-month periods only.

But while extra financial resources are clearly one way of resolving this issue, Canadians must also consider what to do if no funds, or insufficient funds, are made available in future budgets. If they are not, it is imperative that, at the very least, a sweeping review of Canada's defence posture take place. This may require a wholesale review of policy. At the very least, it demands a fresh look at how policy objectives are achieved within an inelastic budgetary envelope. The Auditor-General has determined that the budgetary short-fall facing the Canadian Forces is approximately $1.3-billion per year in 2001-2002.[2] Since the federal government has not disputed these figures, logic demands that policy-makers either make good on those short-falls, or make significant alterations to the mandate and/or the structure of the Canadian Forces. Put simply, since the status quo is unaffordable, we must either 'cough up' or create another status quo - one commensurate with more modest financial resources.

On December 10, 2001 the Chrétien Government tabled its annual budget. While some analysts and commentators anticipated an announcement that DND would be provided with some much-needed relief, it was not to be. The appropriations announced by Finance Minister Paul Martin - amounting to a total $1.2-billion *over the next five years* - will cover the costs of maintaining Canadian Forces in south Asia, augmenting the Joint Task Force Two (JTF-2) commando unit, and various quasi-military initiatives not directly related to what might be viewed as 'traditional' defence tasks. From this we can conclude that the budget did not intend to address the broader challenges facing the military. Rather, it was a 'security' budget - one intended furnish resources for counter-terrorism only.

Further evidence of the government's reluctance to confront the problem of over-commitment and obsolescence rests in the Christmas interview given by the Prime Minister Jean Chrétien to several media outlets. In dismissing calls for more money and by characterizing those calling for increased defence spending as lobbyists for the arms industry[3] the prime minister spoke as the head of the latest in a long line of governments who traditionally have regarded national defence as a low priority compared to more popular spending programs. With a large majority in Parliament and a decidedly weak opposition, it is doubtful that this perspective will undergo any serious change anytime soon. This is unnerving in view of the four key events of late-2001: a report on military readiness by a Commons committee dominated by members of the ruling party[4]; a critique of equipment holdings by a neutral third party (the Auditor-General); an act of superterrorism[5], and; a subsequent war involving a substantial portion of Canada's military. If these will not compel the government to review its own policy and spending patterns, it is unclear what will.

Policy Review...

Assuming that additional financial resources are not forthcoming, is a review of foreign and defence policy really necessary? One could argue that our major foreign policy goals are still valid, in that Canada seeks to foster prosperity at home and stability abroad.[6] It may also be reasonable to state that Canada's enduring defence policy goals - the defence of national territory, the defence of North America with the US, and participation in overseas contingency operations under NATO or UN auspices[7] - are still valid. This contrasts with the conclusion of the SCONDVA which, in its Interim Report, stated that "the context in which we now formulate our foreign and defence policies is fundamentally different from that of only a short while ago."[8] There is much truth in this. Since the last defence and foreign policy reviews, the number of CF deployments has risen significantly. The nature of peacekeeping operations has changed fundamentally, gobbling up personnel and exposing them to levels of danger and stress not associated with 'traditional' inter-positional missions (ie. Cyprus). Conventional warfare, once dismissed as a thing of the past, is still a factor on the international stage (ie. Kosovo, Afghanistan), and Canada, despite its pretensions to being a 'peacekeeping nation', has taken a modest yet active part in it.

After September 11, counter-terrorism and defence against attacks by weapons of mass destruction have risen to the top of the security agenda. Canada's geographical distance from the world's hot-spots does not completely isolate us or our friends from harm. The attacks of September 11 killed 24 Canadians, illustrating the fact that the instabilities of the world may involve Canada whether Canadians (or their governments) like it or not.

The international organizations through which Canada has advances its security interests are also in a state of flux. The Europe Union (EU) continues, however tentatively, to build a common foreign and security identity. If the initiative succeeds it may supplant NATO as the continent's principle security actor. While Washington has supported the 're-balancing' of the trans-Atlantic relationship, it is unclear what such a relationship would look like. Elements within the EU want to see a reduction of US influence in Europe, just a elements in Washington believe Europeans have ridden easily for too long on the US defence budget and must now take care of security matters on the peripheries of the EU. If, by mutual consent or as a result of a dispute, the trans-Atlantic relationship dissolves, will Canada be obliged to choose with whom to align its defence and security efforts? Co-operation and collaboration with like-minded states has been a hallmark of Canada's defence and security policy. Will it be politically or militarily prepared to co-operate with anyone? Our geographic proximity to the US would suggest that the choice, if it ever had to be made, is obvious. This may be too hasty a judgement. Canada's foreign policy culture is much more 'European' than American. Canadians generally accord higher importance to arms control and the primacy of international organizations and law in conflict prevention/resolution than Americans do. Moreover, the capabilities of the US military are so advanced as to raise the question of whether Washington views allied participation in US-led endeavours as a hindrance rather than a help. A policy review would allow the government to proactively address these matters.

Another organization which may undergo dramatic change is the North American Aerospace Defence (NORAD) Command. The Bush Administration's pre-occupation with 'homeland defence' after September 11 has prompted the national security apparatus to contemplate the establishment of a 'Northern Command'. The mandate of the new structure is unclear, although it seems reasonable to assume that defence against a variety of unconventional or asymmetric threats is the objective. Some US officials envision expanding the NORAD agreement to allow bi-national control over elements of the armies, navies, and, possibly, the coast guards of both countries in times of crisis. For Canada, this raises questions of sovereignty and the best way to divide modest defence resources between continental and broader international security goals. Again, a policy review could help the government determine if such an arrangement is in Canada's long-term interest.

...Or Update?

But there is much that has not changed since September 11. The attacks did not, as the Commons Committee suggested, bring "an end to the optimism we all shared with the fall of the Berlin Wall."[9] Surely

102-03923/

the Gulf War, and the numerous wars in the Balkans, Chechnya, and elsewhere had already done that. Also unchanged are two of the primary goals of Canadian foreign policy (see above). Furthermore, the Canadian military was already under strain before the attacks on the US occurred.

What has also remained unchanged is that counter-terrorism is still very much a non-military endeavour. Law enforcement, forensic accounting, customs and immigration, and the various intelligence/counter-intelligence organs are still the lead agencies in this struggle. The Chretien government correctly recognized this in the December 10 budget and provided additional financial resources to them. True, there may be some discreet military capabilities that can be brought to bear either overseas (ie. special forces) or on the home front (ie. nuclear/biological/chemical defence units) but they are not Canada's first line of defence. They are policy tools to be employed in a primarily reactive rather than proactive manner.

The point here is that September 11 may not have been, as some have suggested, the seminal event which obliges Canada to adopt a new defence policy orientation. Regardless of whether the attacks on the US had occurred, Canada's ability to enhance international stability through the prudent use of its armed forces would still be under strain. The CF's role in counter-terror both at home and abroad would still be fairly limited. Most importantly, Canada's long-standing defence policy objectives would remain constant.

Having said that, it could be argued that the campaign being waged in Afghanistan will colour the thinking of strategists for years to come; that the defence policies of Canada, the United States and the West may establish a link between international terrorism and the policy tools which, as stated above, have not traditionally been employed against it. What we have witnessed in recent months is an exercise in counter-terrorism. We have seen the waging of conventional warfare on a country in order to get at the terrorists operating within its borders. It is clear from this that certain conventional military capabilities - strategic airlift, tactical air power, reconnaissance and light infantry operations - are relevant to counter-terrorism. As Canadian, US, and allied forces continue the unenviable task of mopping up pockets of Taliban and al-Qaeda fighters which continue pose a threat to the authority of the new government in Kabul, a peace support mission drawing on some of the same capabilities to foster long-term stability has taken shape.

One hopes that recourse to this strategy will be the exception rather than the rule. Nevertheless, the criticality of eradicating pockets of militants and stabilizing the failed/failing states in which the find shelter must be recognized by the Government of Canada and by defence planners.

That is the Question

If we assume - and this may be a safe assumption - that the government will only partially address the profound financial difficulties facing the Canadian Forces, the resulting obsolescence of major equipment sets and shortages of skilled personnel will in turn lead to a loss of capability. With less capability on hand, even modest policy goals will have to be re-examined to determine if they have any chance of being achieved. In short, money is the driving factor. The evolution of organizations through which Canada acts to further its interests (ie. NORAD) may or may not require a policy review. Much depends on the degree to which the organizational mandate changes to suit emerging security concerns. Similarly, the supplanting of 'old' security concerns by 'new' ones may prompt a review, but this unlikely in Canada's case. Changes to NATO's mandate, the role of the United Nations in conflict resolution, and the challenges posed by ethnic nationalism and super-terrorism have resulted in numerous discussion papers,[10] but they have not convinced the Government of Canada that a *formal* review of defence (or, for that matter, foreign) policy is necessary.

If we assume that the government prefers the safety afforded by the familiar, and that the results of any re-examination of foreign and/or defence policy will not result in any radical changes to either, it follows that only the posture of the Canada's armed forces will be changed; that its architecture will be creatively down-scaled to better conform to the budgetary envelope that it will be forced to inhabit. If the government chooses this option, the affordability and policy relevance of the CF might be ensured by:

1) *Re-capitalizing only two of the three services*. Experience in the Persian Gulf and the Balkans suggest that the navy and air force are the preferred tools for more dangerous overseas tasks. Keeping them combat-ready would allow Canada to uphold its collective defence commitments. The army would be relegated to constabulary tasks at home and abroad.

2) *Adopting a truly 'joint' force structure* with a stronger army at its centre. This would buttress Canada's ability to manage international crises where they most frequently take place - on land. The navy and air force would retain only those capabilities which directly support and sustain land operations.

3) *Confining the CF to one end of the conflict spectrum*. Recently, the government of New Zealand recognized that the changing international security environment, and the steep cost of re-capitalizing the New Zealand Defence Force (NZDF), required very tough choices. Rather than maintaining a miniature model of a general-purpose force, Wellington decided to adopt a defence posture optimized for the types of missions the country was judged most likely to encounter - namely muscular peacekeeping operations abroad

and constabulary tasks at home. Accordingly, capabilities which did not fit this profile (ie. fighter aircraft) were retired and the funds redirected into capabilities that did (ie. tactical air transport and ground forces). As Canada, like New Zealand, is geographically immune from major conventional threats, and since the stabilization of failing/failed states is a worthwhile contribution to international peace and security, adopting the New Zealand model of a specialized force - one that allows for greater depth in key areas - may be a reasonable option.

To be sure, such a profound transition in the structure of the Canadian Forces would take many years. But other countries have already embarked on the road to restructuring, spurred on by the realization that the status quo is both unaffordable and potentially irrelevant to future security needs. And it should be noted that such reviews are not placed solely in the hands of the armed forces who, for very goods reasons, will fear that by giving ground in certain areas they will leave themselves open to evisceration. Their professional advice must be heeded, but parliament and the wider public must also be involved lest the 'new' policy lack the legitimacy it requires for successful implementation.

Conclusion

To conclude, let us review certain key assumptions:

i) Canada's main foreign and defence policy objectives, while somewhat vague, remain essentially valid;

ii) Although foreign and defence policy goals are still reasonable in macro-terms, they provide little guidance as to how far Canada's military can be allowed to shrink and obsolesce before these goals become unattainable;

iii) The events of September 11 have not revealed short-comings of the Canadian Forces because these existed for years prior to the attacks, and because counter-terrorism is principally a non-military activity;

iv) Failure to secure the financial resources deemed necessary by the Auditor-General and SCONDVA in the December, 2001 budget, plus the continuing high tempo of military operations in the Balkans, south Asia, and elsewhere will oblige Canada to re-examine its defence posture;

v) Political guidance for the restructuring of the CF must be strong and immediate. Leaving the matter solely in the hands of DND may preclude the adoption of alternatives to the status quo.

It is the author's view that the cumulative effect of budgetary challenges and changes to the security landscape since the 1994 Defence White Paper was promulgated require a full review of defence policy. In essence, too much water has passed under the bridge in eight years to allow Canada to rely on the existing policy document. But it also the author's view that domestic considerations - in particular the funds devoted to defence as opposed to other federal priorities - will be the only significant variable in a decision by the government to review policy. Even then, Canada's policy goals might be left unchanged in a time of static or shrinking financial resources. This will be done by devoting fewer resources to the pursuit of those goals.

A policy review, while desirable, may not be necessary since goals and commitments are 'virtual'. But a review of force structure clearly is. The Canadian Forces have held up remarkably well under very trying circumstances, and have brought great credit to Canada. But the centre can no longer hold. Policy is driven by budgets and the budget-setters have not provided. And while the Government of Canada and the leadership of the Canadian Forces have recently expressed a desire for a re-examination of policy, it is unclear how wide-ranging the review will be. To be sure, the continued relevance, credibility, and affordability of Canada's armed forces will require tough choices. But Canadians must stop invoking this cliché and start making them. The future is upon us.

Notes

1. Adapted from a presentation made by the author to SCONDVA, 20 November, 2001.
2. Report of the Auditor-General - 2001, Chapter 10, p. 3.
3. Robert Fife, "Armed forces 'well-equipped', Chrétien fires back", *National Post*, December 20, 2001, A6.
4. Standing Committee on National Defence and Veterans Affairs, *State of Readiness of the Canadian Forces: Response to the Terrorist Threat (Interim Report)*, Ottawa: November, 2001,
5. David Rudd, *Super-terror*, Toronto: The Canadian Institute of Strategic Studies, November, 2001.
6. Government of Canada, *Canada's Foreign Policy: Principles and Priorities for the Future*. Ottawa, 1995, 2.
7. *The 1994 Defence White Paper*, Ottawa: Department of National Defence, 1994.
8. SCONDVA, 1.
9. Ibid.
10. Examples include, *Shaping the Future of Canadian Defence Strategy 2020*, <www.vcds.dnd.ca/ads/strategy2k>, *The Responsibility to Protect: Report of the International Commission on State Sovereignty*, <www.iciss-ciise.gc.ca/report-e.asp>. The former is an attempt to guide long-term defence planning, while the latter seeks to establish norms for when military intervention can take place.

Copyright 2002

About the CISS

The Canadian Institute of Strategic Studies meets a need for a body of information on Canadian security issues and promotes public awareness of the significance of national and international developments. The CISS provides a forum for discussion of strategic matters, and through its educational and informational activities seeks to improve the basis for informed choice by the public of Canada and its leaders.